

The Polyphagous Habits of *Polygonia c-album* (L.)

By P. J. BAKER*

In my youth, which was spent in South London, I always associated the larvae of the Comma butterfly (*Polygonia c-album* (L.)) with stinging nettles. Doubtless they were also to be found on others of their recorded range of foodplants but, nevertheless, much searching on Mitcham Common, the Watermeads and an abandoned smallholding, showed the *Urtica* species to be the most obvious pabulum.

When I move to north-west Surrey in 1969, I soon found that *P. c-album* was quite a common butterfly locally. However, extensive searching of the abundant nettles in the neighbourhood over the next few years resulted in not a single larva being found. In spite of this, the Comma remained common and, in 1971, it was quite abundant in both broods.

The answer came in May 1972, when a Comma was noted ovipositing on a five-metre high sapling of one of the *Ulmus* species, which was growing a little apart from an adjacent hedgerow. Thereafter, Commas were regularly seen egg-laying on somewhat isolated elm saplings and bushes up to about seven metres in height. It was quite easy to find larvae and even ova if a suitable elm was examined. All that was necessary was to look at the foliage against a bright sky, when the outline of quite small larvae could be easily detected. (Note that this collecting method is also applicable to the larvae of *Cosmia affinis* (L.) and *C. pyralina* (D. & S.), although for some reason I have never found *C. diffinis* (L.) in this way, even when checking hedgerows which are purported to be a suitable habitat for this latter species.)

By mid-1974 all suitable elms in this area had fallen victim to the Dutch Elm Disease but, although the larvae could not be found on alternative foodplants, the butterfly continued to be quite common.

In the middle of 1976, my wife was kept busy clearing our gooseberry bushes (*Ribes uva-crispa* (L.)) of the many larvae with which they were infested. Two such larvae—which were not immediately recognised—duly produced rather dark imagines of the Comma butterfly. Further larvae were found over the next two months. Quite by chance I happened to observe more Comma caterpillars on the willow (*Salix* spp.) in the garden, and further examples were obtained when working local hop vines (*Humulus lupulus* (L.) for *Hypena rostralis* (L.)).

Both the gooseberries, the willow and the hops have been regularly worked or checked over the last few years, and this is the first occasion on which Comma larvae have been found thereon. It therefore seems highly likely that we have witnessed a definite and recent change in the habits of the local population of this insect. Although many of the early authors mention the above range of plant species as being likely pabula for the Comma, this is my first experience of any other

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than *Urtica* and *Ulmus* spp. It would be very interesting to hear from other readers about this subject now that the elms are dead and dying over such a large part of the country.

References

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STICTOPERA PERNIGRA LEGRAND: A LITTLE-KNOWN NOCTUID MOTH FROM THE SEYCHELLES ISLANDS. — I spent the period November 6th to 14th, 1976 on Mahé, the largest of the Seychelles archipelago, attending the 4th Pan-African Ornithological Congress. We were some 260 delegates all housed in the spacious Mahé Beach Hotel, opened a year previously on the west coast of the island. My bedroom was on the seventh floor overlooking the sea. On the balcony was a fairly bright light which I put on each night at dusk, which fell about 7 p.m. On the 9th, there was quite an attendance of insects among which was a fairly large noctuid with rather narrow forewings and in very fresh condition. It was not until three months later that I showed it to Mr. Alan Hayes at the Natural History Museum. He at once recognised it as the species designated above, of which very few specimens are known with only a single damaged example from the Percy-Sladen Expedition of 1908, a male, in the National collection.

M. Legrand in his large monograph, *Lépidoptères des îles Seychelles et d'Aldabra* (1965) describes this insect as a form of the Madagascan species *Stictoptera antemarginata* Saal-müller, though it seems to have close affinities with the widespread and very variable eastern species *S. cucullioides* Guenée. But *S. pernigra* differs superficially very materially from these other two insects, since its hindwings are very suffused with hardly any hyaline space apparent, whereas the somewhat similar two *Stictoptera* have a very large hyaline space with a very well-defined black border to the hindwings. These points are strong evidence for considering the Seychelles insect as a separate species.

Legrand cites two males taken by the late Sir John Fryer in 1912 on île Félicité, with a further two from Beau Vallon on Mahé in 1959, a single example from Silhouette island, also in 1959, and another from Beau Vallon in 1960 taken by M. Gerber. These seem to be the only other records of this moth with all these recent captures in the Paris Museum. Mr. Hayes has shown me coloured transparencies of two of the Paris examples, which have somewhat different markings on the forewings from my specimen.

Another endemic species I also took at this balcony light, was a perfect female of the large striking pyralid *Cirrhichrista mulleralis* Legrand, with its silvery white forewings blotched with orange markings. — C. G. M. DE WORMS, Three Oaks, Woking.